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# THE INCAPACITY OF BUSINESS WOMEN.

BY MARION HARLAND.

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IN THIS article it will be taken for granted that men conduct all branches of what is known as business—manufacturing, mercantile, professional, and even educational—more systematically and successfully than women. Such shining exceptions as arise in the mind of every reader who is inclined to doubt the premises make the surrounding gloom more apparent.

She who refuses to recognize the truth is a short-sighted champion of her sex. She who, perceiving the justice of the censure, throws the blame of the present state of affairs upon tyrant man, and exhorts an oppressed class to rebellion that shall reverse the position of governed and governors, offers an intoxicating draught instead of a remedy.

During the war in the Sudan, a young British officer in charge of the signal service, posted for the time upon the top of the Great Pyramid, was so uplifted by historic associations and Napoleonic example as to telegraph to the admiral's ship, just arrived in the nearest offing: "*Forty centuries salute you!*" The martinet superior signalled back: "None of your [expletive] nonsense! Attend to business!"

This somewhat profane anecdote illustrates what I shall offer as the fundamental cause of the unfitness of the average woman for business pursuits. Not forty, but sixty, centuries of PRECEDENT handicap her who would earn her bread after the manner of men, without fear of social ostracism and without favor offered as a gallant gratuity. From the time of her foremother Eve until now, hers has been unsalaried labor. Two centuries of the same system of desultory tasks, done for board and clothing, sufficed to make thriftless pensioners of the colored race. He who has never known for himself the duties and responsibilities of ownership is, notoriously, a bad guardian of others' property.

The Indian dervish whose arm, upshot in prayer, is held thus,

week by week, until he cannot lower it, is not an inapt figure of the modern woman. She has had her "keep," and pocket-money for the asking—quantity and quality depending upon the manner of petition, her lord's humor, or her personal attractions—for unnumbered generations. To expect from her stiffened muscles such action as he displays whose moral and mental brawn has been developed by the steady exercise of centuries is cruelly preposterous.

Leaving general propositions for particular instances, we will take a department of honest toil where, it is affirmed, women compete most successfully with men—that of the sales-clerk, especially in dry-goods, fancy, and millinery shops. The sternest master virtually admits the comparative incompetency of his feminine employees in other ways, as well as in wages. The laxity of discipline among them is manifest to the least observant. The "sales-lady" who waits upon me may be supercilious to the verge of impertinence, slow, and inattentive; she may hum a tune while listlessly displaying the wares she is paid to exhibit to advantage, and carry on lively, if intermittent, gossip or altercation with her mates, while I am—in spite of her—conducting my purchases,—and all in sight and hearing of the floor-walker who would arraign a salesman for any one of these offences against common courtesy. The feminine peculiarities of levity, wandering eyes and thoughts, misnamed "vivacity," and the quality we term in colts and kittens "skittishness," are so well known to every overlooker of women clerks, operatives, and teachers as to purchase indulgence, unconsciously exercised and ungratefully received. Moreover, these idiosyncrasies, seldom catalogued as faults, *keep wages down*.

The office-boy is ruled up sharply by line and plummet, not only as to work, but deportment. He must be punctual, move quickly and quietly, leave all thought of frolic and out-door companionships behind when he crosses the threshold of his place of business; he must be prompt and respectful in speech to employers, and civil to customer, client, and caller—or he goes! The girl stenographer and typewriter "giggles and makes giggle" with the girl book-keeper, and has tiffs (audible) with her enemy, the "old-maid" cashier. One and all, when reproofed for negligence, breach of rules, or inefficiency, they retort, or sulk, or—most likely—snivel! In no one respect is precedent more potent than in this matter of women's tears. The briny drip is the most powerful solvent known to science or sentimentalist. I have in

memory the true story of one "lady" manager of an important department, who kept her place long after her unfitness was acknowledged by the firm, because of a proclivity to hysterics. Every man in the establishment, married or celibate, shrank from the task of discharging her. The information that she must seek another position was finally conveyed in a letter, enclosing a *placebo* in the form of a check, written and sent to her by a partner on the eve of sailing for Europe.

Such straws show the trend of the popular estimate of women's unfitness for business pursuits. It is as natural for a man to avoid "scenes" as for women to get them up. Some of the latter trade, wittingly, upon feeling, calculating cunningly upon the proverbial effect of lachrymal demonstration. The majority do not. Precedent, which they mistake for Nature and one of Heaven's laws, decrees that they must be treated according to a certain set of rules—men according to another and a different.

Here lies the defective spot in the claim for equitable wages for working women. Physical disability apart, *they do not work as men do*. A man grasps his business with both hands. If his hands are not strong enough, he clamps it with his feet, and, rather than let it go, seizes it with his jaws. It is his life—himself! A woman, even when the daily bread of herself and her children depends upon a clerkship, or employment in a factory, or the teacher's place in a public school, regards her labor as the means to an end. It is the ladder reared against the height she would win. A man's chosen craft or profession is the central stone staircase, built into the solid structure. Men work by the job, concentrating every energy upon the task of perfecting that which must pass or be rejected upon its own merit. Women go out by the day—and watch the clock! Men have ambitions; women have hopes.

The reasons assigned for these radical differences are led off in most essays on the subject, and pertinently, by the fact that women look forward to marriage as a definite means of support, and hold but loosely that which they may be called upon at any moment to give up. With an immense proportion of the sex this explanation more than covers the ground. It does not account for the perfunctory manner in which the deserted wife or faithful widow walks through what she makes to be the tread-mill of daily toil. She considers the necessity of self-support as violence done to Nature and PRECEDENT. Always *that*! The contestants

for equal rights and equitable compensation must dethrone this idol before women can become self-supporting. The work which is not honored of the laborer will never honor her.

I had occasion once to call in the services of a trained nurse for a member of my family. While the child remained extremely ill, the attendant was all that could be desired for skill, fidelity, and modest dignity of deportment. The crisis passed and convalescence assured, precedent came to the front. The nurse discoursed to the patient by the hour upon the hard lot that had obliged her to earn her living; enumerated the handsome gowns, silver, and other valuables that had been hers in her former estate; unfolded to me her pedigree of gentlemen and gentlewomen for four generations, and dropped tears upon the bread she toasted while asserting to the kitchen-cabinet her right to be treated as a "real lady, although unfortunate."

Another sick-nurse, an otherwise sensible woman of forty-odd years, carried about with her always a roll of MS. penned by her late husband, a drunken penny-a-liner, whose one kindness to her was done in dying. "Ah! if he had lived to get his book printed, I'd never have been taking care of sick people for twenty dollars a week and my board!" was her lament. Being a woman, with sixty centuries of women like herself behind her, she never suspected how much more honorably lucrative was her present position than that of the half-starved and maltreated slave of a human brute.

A week ago I was detained by a shower in a fancy store, and dropped into chat with the sad-faced mistress of the neat establishment. A chance comment from me upon the ways of the professional "shopper" led to the usual thing. She "never thought in the days when she lived in her own brownstone front, and kept her carriage, that she would ever be reduced to *this*," etc., etc.

The small merchant (masculine) who should descend to such maundering with a passing stranger would stamp himself as one who deserved to be unsuccessful in any station of life. Until reduced gentlewomen leave their breeding to speak for itself, and, instead of making drafts upon the sympathy of the community because the trade-harness galls their tender shoulders, bear it so gallantly as to enforce respect from those who only see how well they do that which they have chosen—not reluctantly accepted—they cannot complain that their own estimate of their position is assumed as just by people at large.

The dressmaker who goes out by the day, and so hotly resents the indignity of a napkined tray laden with a tempting lunch sent up to the sewing-room that she quits the house and throws up a profitable engagement, is unbusiness-like, and also illogically foolish. She is neither one of the family nor an invited guest. The circumstance of eating from the same board with her employers, with whom she has nothing in common except that they pay her ample wages for making their clothes, lowers, not raises, her in the social scale. The same may be said of the saleswoman who "takes her time," obviously and offensively, in measuring ribbon and making change, to impress an impatient customer, who has to catch a train, with the idea that she is "as good as anybody else and not to be ordered around like a hireling."

These are not cited as unimportant weaknesses to be smiled at, or, at most, despised. They represent sentiments and motives which seriously hinder the working-woman from rendering herself free and independent. She must make labor, and the drawbacks and trials incident to labor, an impersonal matter, and relegate feeling to the sacred domain of the inner life, if she would command success. The moment she takes advantage of the accident of her sex and appeals to sentimentality, instead of justice, she begs the question, and sinks toward pauperism.

Closely contingent upon this fashion of looking backward, and not forward, is the spiritless performance of duties inseparable from the condemned office. It cannot be otherwise. Action, in such a case, is but stony-ground grain, and only kept from withering out of sight by the irrigation of wages.

What, then, is needed to raise up for this generation a class of business women who will dignify their sex and quell the clamor of the prisoners of poverty? First, last, and always, *to undertake the allotted labor with the forceful purpose of performing it as if it were the one and only object in life.*

An editorial writer in the *Christian Union* said lately in a talk with "Business Boys": "The boy who will succeed in the world is he who is content, for a time, to do two dollars' worth of work for a dollar." Business girls need to bind this precept upon heart and hand. Determination to fulfil every obligation thoroughly, in spirit and in letter, should outrank the thought of the money to be made by this particular undertaking. First, excellence of workmanship; then, what price will it command? The girl who

studies book-keeping or stenography as a stop-gap against the tide of impecuniosity until she can wed a bread-and-bonnet-winner, enacts the trite role of the little Haarlem hero with his thumb in the dike leak. She is like one who watches for the morning, and, in proportion as her heart fails at the delay of dawn, interest in her occupation declines. Judging by her standard of values the business laid importunately to her hand and the wedlock that *may* come, we may well remind her that faithfulness in that which is least is the earnest of faithfulness in that which is great. The steadfast industry, the discipline of speech and conduct, the concentration of thought and energy upon the matter set before one for accomplishment, that are essential to business prosperity, are the best conceivable preparation for the high and holy sphere of wife, housekeeper, and mother.

It is more sadly true that the home in which the wife is denied all knowledge of business methods and principles is the worst possible school for the duties which may, which often do, devolve upon a widow. Why practical, long-headed husbands and fathers regard complacently the inability of wives and daughters to audit tradesmen's bills and keep their own personal accounts, is an anomaly of human nature and conduct that usually goes unrebuked. To pursue this system until to full-grown babies and an equally inefficient mother is committed the management of all that stands between them and want, is like demanding from a jelly-fish, left high by the tide, the hardy pugnacity of a warrior-crab.

With the exit of Lydia Languish and Laura Matilda from the stage of every-day life has come the need for better stuff to meet the demands of an age that is terribly in earnest. Fortunes are not now salted down in three-per-cent. consols and other government securities, to await the possible exigencies of wife and children. The more luxurious our girl's home to-day, the likelier she is to be to-morrow among those whose call (I quote from a letter upon my desk) for "work which a woman who was educated to do nothing in particular can handle" comes to the ear of the lover of her sex like the wail of unbaptized babies wandering in the outer darkness. We pity the petitioners; but can we forgive the mistaken fondness that hears in the lamentable cry no warning demand for business education for women?

MARION HARLAND.